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Empress-Widow Verina's Political Activity during the Reign of Emperor Zeno

Among the empresses of Byzantium there were a lot of ambitious, talented women, who cleverly acted on the political scene, such as, Pulcheria the sister of Theodosius II and emperor Marcian's wife; Theodora – Justinian the Great's wife; Irene – Leo IV's wife and mother of Constantine VI or Theophano – the wife of Roman III and Nicephorus Phocas. In my opinion empress Verina, the heroine of this work, can be counted in this group as well.

Quite surprisingly historians have not been particularly interested in her life. Apart from a few small articles and mentions in some syntheses of Byzantine history we have no works referring to her at all¹.

The aim of this work is to show Verina's political activity during the reign of her son-in-law, emperor Zeno. This period of her life is relatively well-known, but, in my opinion it requires reconsideration because some opinion which have existed since the end of 19th. century and have been repeated in the newer literature not always can be accepted.

Verina had already been the wife of Leo I before he became emperor in 457. They had three children: a son, who died at the age of 5 months,

¹ E. W. Brooks, *The Emperor Zeno and the Isaurians*, *English Historical Review* 8 (1893) 216–229; J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from Death of Theodosius I. to the Death of Justinian*, vol. 1–2, New York 1958, p. 389sq.; 426sq; W. Ensslin, *Verina*, in: *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (later RE), Bd. VIIIA, 2, 1958, col. 1546–1548; E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, t. 1, *De l'Etat Romain à l'Etat Byzantin* (284–476), Paris 1959, p. 533sq; t. 2: *De la disparition de l'Empire d'Occident à la mort de Justinien* (476–565), Paris-Bruxelles-Amsterdam 1949, p. 8–10, 15–16, 28–30; J. Kulakovski, *Istorija Vizantii*, vol. 1, London 1973, p. 398sq.; J. R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of Later Roman Empire*, vol. 2, A.D. 395–527, Cambridge 1980, p. 1156 (later PLRE); *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A. Kazhdan, vol. 3, New York, Oxford 1991, p. 2160.

and two daughters – Ariadne and Leontia². While Ariadne, the elder offspring, came to the world before her father's raising to the throne, her younger sister was lucky enough to be born as emperor's daughter. The both daughters played an important role in the basilissa's life after the death of Leo I. Little is known about Verina's political activity during the reign of her husband, most probably due to the scantiness of sources rather, than her real lack of interest towards the affairs of the Empire. The fact that empress' family members were promoted to high state offices and posted to military commands just at that time, seems to prove Verina's considerable influence on her husband. The career of Verina's brother, Basiliscus, or her nephew, Armatus³, can be put forward as good examples illustrating this hypothesis. We can suppose, that also Iulius Nepos' career was at least partly caused by Verina's support⁴. It should be stressed, however, that Verina's strong attachment to her family cannot be treated as the only reason why she supported them, since many of the promoted proved to possess remarkable talents for both political and military activities⁵. Although we can assume that Verina had certain impact on her relatives, her efficient intervention in the care of Basiliscus, who after unsuccessful campaign against the Vandals had fallen in disfavour and had to look for a shelter in the Church of Hagia Sophia, has been sufficiently testified in sources⁶.

Verina was not independent enough until after her spouse's decease. It was only thanks to her participation in important historical events during the reign of her son-in-law, Zeno, that she was seriously recorded in the Byzantine history.

After Leo I died on 18 January 474, Leo II, his seven-year-old grandson, succeeded to the throne, but soon he bestowed the power on his father Zeno. According to Evagrius Scholasticus, Zeno's promotion was supported by Verina⁷. Indirect evidence of that is a rescript issued by the empress

² W. Ensslin, *op. cit.*, col. 1546; PLRE II, p. 1156.

³ On Verina and her brother Basiliscus' family connections see M. Salamon, *Basiliscus cum Romanis Suis*, „Studia Moesiaca”, Poznań 1994, p. 187–193.

⁴ Iulius Nepos was probably connected with basilissa by his wife – *ibidem*, p. 190–191.

⁵ See remarks of M. Salamon on Basiliscus (*op. cit.*, p. 180–181).

⁶ Procopius, *De bello Vandlico*, I, 6 (Procopius, With English Translation by H. B. Dewing, vol. II, London 1916). See also Hartmann, *Bazyliskos*, RE, Bd. III, 1899, col. 101. Basiliscus was commander of the expedition against the Vandals in 468. The campaign ended in defeat and disaster for Romans. Verina's brother was alleged to have taken bribes from Vandals. On his return to Constantinople Basiliscus sought sanctuary in the Church of Hagia Sophia.

⁷ Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II, 17 (later Evagrius, HE), *Patrologiae cursus completus... series graeca*... accurate, J. P. Migne, t. 86 (later PG). Cf. W. Ensslin, *op. cit.*, col. 1547; A. Lippold, *Zenon*, RE, Bd. X A, 1972, col. 158.

during the usurpation of Leontius in 484. She stated in this document that she had given Zeno imperial power⁸. Although there is no reason to doubt that Verina supported Zeno a few months later she stood up against him. When Zeno was proclaimed Augustus, the question of succession was clear. From the formal point of view the first emperor was Verina's grandson, Leo the Younger, who could later become real ruler, or co-emperor, of his father. Verina maintained the influence at the court for giving Zeno support in gaining power, but she had to give up the idea of playing the more important role.

The situation changed at the moment of Leo the Younger's death⁹. Zeno, who was unpopular among senatorial aristocracy and people of Constantinople¹⁰ lost, apart from the support of Isaurians, the fundamental factor which stabilized his position. Oppositionists at the top of the army, probably connected with the delegitimized Germanic party under Aspar¹¹ and in the senatorial circles, had got a free hand. New perspectives appeared for Verina too.

In January 475 Zeno fled Constantinople. Verina as well was among those who caused the removal of unpopular emperor.

Some sources and some historians¹² see *spiritus movens* of the conspiracy against Zeno in Verina herself. Is this view correct?

We can divide the sources which report the events before Zeno's expulsion into three groups.

To the first group I would count the reports from Candidus Isaurus and Malalas. According to these authors, Verina was the chief of the conspiracy against Zeno. Candidus states: „...Verina tricked her son-in-law into flight hoping that she would marry Patricius, the master of the offices,

⁸ „Aelia Verina, perpetual Augusta, to our citizens of Antioch. Know that the imperial rule is ours, and that after death of Leo of pious memory, we chose as emperor Traskilisseos, [my underlining – M.J.L.] later renamed Zeno...” – *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, transl. by E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys and R. Scott, Melbourne 1986, p. 217. Cf. Constantinus Porphyrogennetus, *Excerpta de insidiis*, fr. 35, ed. C. de Boor, Berolini 1905, p. 165; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 5974, ed. C. de Boor, vol. 1, Lipsiae 1883 (later Theoph.); *The Chronicle of John Bishop of Nikiou*, 88, ed. R. H. Charles, London–Oxford 1916.

⁹ Leo died in November 474. It was the turning point in Verina's attitude towards Zeno – cf. W. Ensslin, *op. cit.*, col. 1547.

¹⁰ *Chronika Ješu Stilita*, 12, in: N. Pigulewska, *Miesopotamija na rubieże V–VI ww.*, Moskwa 1940, p. 132 (later *Ješu Stilita*); cf. Evagrius, HE, III, 1–3; *Zonaras Epitome historiarum*, XIV, 2 (later *Zonaras*), PG t. 134, col. 1209.

¹¹ C. D. Gordon, *The Age of Attila. Fifth-Century Byzantium and the Barbarians*, Michigan 1960, p. 143–144. On Aspar see PLRE II, p. 164–169.

¹² For example: E. W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 216; J. B. Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 390; C. D. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

and that he would become Emperor"¹³. According to Candidus, the reasons for the usurpation were purely personal, and dictated solely by ambition. Malalas tells us about a conflict between Zeno and Verina. As a consequence Verina stood up against her son-in-law. She won a support of *τινος τῶν τοῦ παλατίου*¹⁴. Unfortunately the chronicler did not give any background for the conflict.

The other group of sources shows Basiliscus as the inspirer of the plot. Verina would only support her brother then. We find this version in *Ecclesiastical History* by Theodoros Anagnostes. He writes that Basiliscus staying in Heraclea, decided to plot against Zeno. He was supported by Verina and *τινων τῆς συγκλήτου*¹⁵. Such newer sources as Theophanes¹⁶, Zonaras¹⁷ and the slavonic-translation of Simeon Logothetos¹⁸, for example, present the same version.

Finally the third group of sources sees the inspirer of the usurpation in Basiliscus and does not mention Verina's role at all¹⁹. They give no new details, besides the testimony of Procopius in *Bello Vandalico*. The author states that the cause of Basiliscus' conspiracy was his greed for power²⁰.

The most important source, explaining the responsibility for preparing the plot against Zeno, is the work of John of Antioch. The author univocally points at Basiliscus as the inspirer of the conspiracy. John of Antioch explains the circumstances of Verina's participation in the plot. According to that historian, Basiliscus put Illus²¹, the most eminent, besides the emperor, person among Isaurians on his side. Illus was sent by Basiliscus to Constantinople with the letter to Armatus. Basiliscus ordered Illus to get in touch with Verina to whom, as I think, he was supposed to put forward a proposal of cooperation. In return for her support for

¹³ Candidus, in: *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire. Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*, text, transl. and notes R. C. Blockley, vol. 2, Liverpool 1983, p. 467 (later FCH).

¹⁴ Ioannes Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. B. G. Niebuhr, Bonnae 1831, p. 377 (later Malalas); the same version – *Chronicon Paschale*, vol. 1, ed. L. Dindorf, Bonnae 1832, p. 600.

¹⁵ Theodoros Anagnostes, *Kirchengeschichte*, herausg. G. Ch. Hansen, Berlin 1971, p. 112.

¹⁶ Theoph., AM 5967, p. 120.

¹⁷ Zonaras, XIV, 2, col. 1209.

¹⁸ *Slavjanskij perevod chroniki Simeona Logotheta*, ed. V. I. Sreznevskij, London 1971, p. 52 (Simeon also mentions Armatus as the most eminent member of the conspiracy).

¹⁹ Evagrius, HE, III, 3 (he underlines Zeno's unscrupulous character; according to a church historian it justifies Basiliscus' usurpation); *Ješu Stylita*, 12, p. 132; *Excerpta Valesiana*, 9, 41 (ed. Anonymi Valesiani, in: *Ammianus Marcellinus. With an English Translation* by J. C. Rolfe, vol. 3, London 1958).

²⁰ Procopius, *De bello Vandalico*, 1, 2 (according to Procopius Basiliscus wanted to seize the throne, thanks to Aspar's support, during the reign of Leo I).

²¹ On Illus see PLRE II, p. 586–590.

the plotters, Patricius, the master of offices and her lover would become ruler. According to John of Antioch, Verina „desired this on her own account, she readily inclined to the suggestion”²². The plotters needed Verina’s help as the basilissa was likely to have loyal supporters at the court²³. Their support could facilitate the expulsion of Zeno.

There is one obscure point in John’s testimony. If Basiliscus proposed Patricius the accession to the throne, what did he want for himself? He had held the highest state offices and military command. How can one suppose there was nothing besides the imperial throne that could satisfy him? How can it agree with John’s record? I think there are two possible explanations: 1. Basiliscus was to become emperor and after his accession he would proclaim Patricius co-emperor. 2. As Verina and Patricius could not have children due to the fact that they were advanced in years, they might have promised Basiliscus to make Mark, his son, their successor. I think that the first possibility sounds more likely. The evidence can be proved by the fact, that Verina crowned his brother²⁴. It is doubtful whether she did it under pressure. Basiliscus did not fulfil his promise. He ordered to murder Patricius because he did not want to share power with Verina and her lover. That event led to a breach between the basilissa and her brother which indirectly proves my hypothesis.

The conclusion is that it was Basiliscus who was the inspirer of the conspiracy against emperor Zeno. Empress-dowager Verina joined to the conspiracy eluded by the promise of proclaiming Patricius co-emperor. That was the way she could fulfil her ambitions.

At the beginning of Zeno’s reign Verina’s hostility to the emperor was not so evident and she did not want to raise against him. That could be proved by the fact that it was the empress herself who informed Zeno about the plot, and advised him to flee from Constantinople immediately. Candidus Isaurus saw this situation as Verina’s trick only²⁵. Modern

²² Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 210; transl. in: C. D. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 144. Otherwise E. W. Brooks (*op. cit.*, p. 217) who does not notice connection between contact of Basiliscus and Illus, and the Illus’ activity in Constantinople.

²³ One of them was surely Aeodinus, *comes domesticorum*, – Malchus, fr. 20 in: FCH, p. 439. On Aeodinus see PLRE II, p. 11.

²⁴ Malalas, p. 378; *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 600; *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum, Patria Constantinopoleos*, II, 25, rec. T. Preger, Leipzig 1989, p. 164. In 484 Verina was used by Illus to crown usurper Leontius. We have to remember that Illus was the witness of Basiliscus’ coronation. See also W. Ensslin, *Zur Frage nach der ersten Kaiserkrönung durch den Patriarchen und zur Bedeutung dieses Aktes im Wahlzeremoniell*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 42(1943) 112. Cf. F. Winkelmann, *Zur Rolle der Patriarchen von Konstantinopel bei den Kaiserwechseln in frühbyzantinischer Zeit*, *Klio* 60(1978) 471–472.

²⁵ Candidus, p. 466.

scholars accept this opinion²⁶. Still I have certain doubts. Making Zeno's escape possible was a political blunder. The emperor fled to Isauria with his wife and mother and with all the valuables. There, he could prepare for his return to power. The plotters, having the support of the army commanders, some of the senators and the people of Constantinople, were able to execute Zeno. It can be supposed that Verina protected her son-in-law from death. We must remember that Ariadne, Verina's daughter, was Zeno's wife. It is possible that the mother wanted to protect her daughter from the mortal danger.

Only Candidus Isaurus writes about Verina's activity during the reign of Basiliscus. According to him, after Patricius' death: „Verina came to hate her brother and gave financial aid to Zeno in his attempts to regain his throne”²⁷. Her activity was discovered by Basiliscus. Being in danger, Verina had to hide in a church. She was saved by Armatus²⁸. Unfortunately we do not compare Candidus' testimony with other sources. Later events evidence that Verina had been in contact with Zeno, because after his return to power she became one of the most influential persons at the court²⁹.

Later history of Verina was connected with Illus, who especially contributed to Zeno's return to power. He became omnipotent at the court³⁰. He was the person who threatened Verina and her position at the court. As I suppose Illus became also dangerous for Zeno himself. The emperor did not want to risk an open conflict with Illus³¹, therefore he undertook a secret action to assassinate his antagonist. There were three attempts on Illus' life³². One of them in 478 was done at the instigation of Verina.

²⁶ For instance: E. W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 216; J. Kulakovski, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

²⁷ Candidus, p. 467; transl. R. C. Blockley.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 466, 468.

²⁹ According to Malalas (p. 379-380) and *Chronicon Paschale* (p. 601) Verina was among the people who welcomed Zeno in the palace after his return to Constantinople. Evidence of Verina's influence is, for example, her participation in the creating of Byzantine politic towards Odoacer and Iulius Nepos - Malchus, fr. 14; J. Kulakovski, *op. cit.*, p. 410; E. Stein, *op. cit.*, I, p. 46-47.

³⁰ J. B. Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 394; C. D. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 147; A. Lippold, *op. cit.*, col. 164. E. W. Brooks states (*op. cit.*, 216) that Illus „enjoyed a power as great as or greater than that of the emperor himself”.

³¹ We must remember that in 475 Illus imprisoned Longinus, Zeno's brother (PLRE II, p. 689). He held him as a hostage in Isauria and therefore, Zeno could be apprehensive for Longinus' safety.

³² The first attack on Illus occurred probably in 477. According to John of Antioch „Paulus, a friend of the emperor, was caught with his sword drawn in a plot against Illus”. (Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 211. 1; transl. in: C. D. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 148). Zeno avoided a conflict by surrendering Paulus to Illus' vengeance and conferring a consulship on him in 478.

A certain soldier, an Alan by race, attacked Illus and was arrested. Being put to torture, the soldier admitted that the deed took place at the instigation of Epinicus, probably *praefectus urbis Constantinopoleos*, who was a friend of Verina³³. Epinicus was removed from his office and stripped of his property³⁴. Illus sent him to Isauria³⁵. Being apprehensive for his safety Illus asked permission from Zeno to go to Isauria. There he met Epinicus, who admitted that the plot against him had been concocted by Verina³⁶. Zeno called Illus back to Constantinople, because his presence was sorely needed on account of Ostrogothic hostilities in Illyricum and Thrace³⁷. Illus came to Chalcedon and demanded Verina as a guarantee of his safety³⁸. Zeno agreed to Illus' demand. He entrusted the basilissa to Matronianus, Illus' brother-in-law, who took her to Isauria. In Tarsus she was forced to become a nun³⁹. The place of the exile was first Dalisandus and then Cherris⁴⁰. This way Verina was removed from a political life.

A question arises, whether the attempt on Illus's life was Verina's unaided step. It seems that the answer cannot be positive. We can assume that Zeno himself was the one who inspired the undertaking. Zeno, trying to protect himself against a possible fiasco of the attack preferred to hide behind Verina's back. The fact that after Illus's departure to Isauria Verina was at the top of the power⁴¹ (which was the result of Zeno's support) makes that scenario of events possible. The emperor's grace was the aftereffect of favour done to him by the empress. Even if Verina's move was not caused by Zeno's inspiration, it is hardly possible that it was made without at least his silent consent. The ending of the affair turned out to be disastrous for the empress. As it was mentioned, she was Illus' hostage. It seems that her relationships with her son-in-law were not bad (which is claimed by some sources). Illus, who knew the relationships at the Constantinopolitan court very well, would not have taken someone worthless for Zeno as a hostage. We can assume that it was the emperor, not Verina, who Illus was afraid of.

³³ Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 211. 1. On Epinicus see PLRE II, p. 397.

³⁴ Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 211. 2.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ J. B. Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

³⁸ Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 211. 2.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Malchus, fr. 23: „Verina, who was then at the height of her power” – transl. R. C. Blockley in: FCH, p. 453. Verina's contribution to the exile of Pamprepus (Illus' protégé) from Constantinople points out the former's considerable influence. See also M. Salamon, *Pamprepisz z Panopolis – pisarz, profesor, polityk, obrońca pogaństwa w cesarstwie wschodnim*, in: *Studia Classica et Byzantina. Alexandro Krawczuk Oblata*, Kraków 1996, p. 175.

A political role of Verina, in spite of the exile, did not come to an end. In 479 Marcian, Verina's son-in-law, attempted to overthrow Zeno⁴². Some scholars referring to John of Antioch claim that the cause of Marcian's usurpation was the treatment of Verina by Zeno and Illus⁴³. I think that the treatment of Verina was only a pretext from the greedy for power Marcian. And being in Isauria, Verina could not influence the situation in Constantinople.

Verina played an important role in the political life of Byzantium during the usurpation of Illus and Leontius in 484⁴⁴. In 481 the final dissent between Illus and Zeno occurred. Empress Ariadne demanded from Illus liberation of Verina, her mother. He definitely refused. Then Zeno agreed to murder Illus. With the aid of Urbicius, *praepositus sacri cubiculi*, Ariadne prepared assassination of Illus. It was made during a celebration in the hippodrome but failed. The assassin cut Illus' ear, but was himself killed on the spot⁴⁵. After that event Zeno appointed Illus master of soldiers in the East. His headquarters was Antioch. Here Illus spent two years making plans for a rebellion against Zeno. In 484 he proclaimed patrician Leontius emperor. In this event Verina played an important role. Illus obtained from her a promise to crown Leontius. That act was the main element of legitimizing Leontius' power⁴⁶. Verina also issued rescript in which she explained the reasons of her step⁴⁷. What were the causes of such attitude? I think that Verina did not act under pressure. She wanted to take revenge on Zeno, who had betrayed her⁴⁸. On the other hand she got a chance to play, once again, an important role. We must remember that she had been

⁴² On Marcian's usurpation see E. W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 220; J. B. Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 395; W. Ensslin, *Marcianus*, RE, Bd. XIV, 2, 1930, col. 1549; E. Stein, *op. cit.*, 2, p. 15-16; J. Jarry, *Hérésies et factions dans l'Empire Byzantin du IV^e au VI^e siècles*, La Caire 1968, p. 254-258.

⁴³ Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 211. 3: ...διὰ τὴν πρόφασιν Βηρίνας; cf. E. W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 220; W. Ensslin, *Marcianus*, col. 1548.

⁴⁴ On that usurpation see E. W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 220-230; J. B. Bury, *op. cit.*, p. 396-398; E. Stein, *op. cit.*, t. 2, p. 28-31; W. Ensslin, *Leontius*, RE, Supplementband VIII, 1956, col. 939-941; Gl. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest*, Princeton, New Jersey 1961, p. 490-495; J. Jarry, *op. cit.*, p. 258-264; P. Chuvin, *Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, London 1990, p. 96-100; M. Salamon, *Pamprepiusz...*, p. 182-193.

⁴⁵ Malalas, p. 387; Theoph. AM 5972, p. 127; cf. Ješu Stilita, 13, p. 132-133.

⁴⁶ On that problem see M. Leszka, *Legalizacja władzy uzurpatorów we wczesnym Bizancjum*, Acta Universitatis Lodzensis. Folia Historica 48(1993) 86-89. Verina crowned Leontius emperor on 19 July 484 in the Church of St. Peter outside Tarsus. On the date see D. Pingree, *Political Horoscopes from the Reign of Zeno*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 30(1976) 136 sq.

⁴⁷ M. Leszka, *op. cit.*, 87-88; M. Salamon, *Pamprepiusz...*, p. 183.

⁴⁸ E. W. Brooks, *op. cit.*, 226.

in exile for six years and she did not want to agree to it. She certainly hated Illus but he gave her a chance and she took the chance. That decision proved not to be a good one. Once again, she could enjoy the full attraction of power but the usurpation failed. Illus, Leontius and Verina fled to fortress Papyrion in the Isaurian mountains. Here, probably in autumn 484, the empress died⁴⁹. Her death may have been caused by a breakdown after the defeat or by the difficulties of the long life. After the suppression of the revolt Ariadne buried the body of her mother in a royal fashion in the Church of St. Apostles in Constantinople⁵⁰.

Verina had been Leo I's companion on the imperial throne for seventeen years, still she owes her place in the Byzantine history to her activity during the reign of emperor Zeno, her son-in-law. She was an ambitious woman, able to act at the Byzantine court. She was an influential person, too, but I think, that at the most important moments (like the plot against Zeno in 475, or Leontius' usurpation) she was only a puppet in the hands of more experienced Byzantine politicians.

⁴⁹ Malalas, p. 389; Theoph., AM 5975, p. 129; Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 214, 6.

⁵⁰ Theoph., AM 5975, p. 129; Ioannes Antiochenus, fr. 214, 12.